

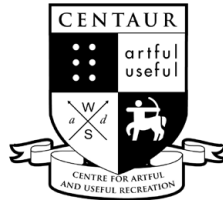
KORVU

DROWNED OR DRY,
VASSAL OF THE SEA

A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS

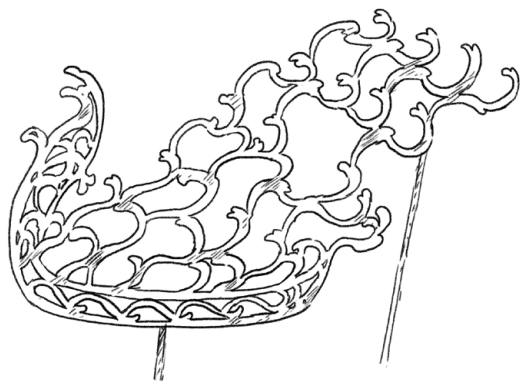
KORVU

DROWNED OR DRY,
VASSAL OF THE SEA



TEXT ZEDECK SIEW
ILLUSTRATIONS MUNKAO

A THOUSAND THOUSAND ISLANDS



WANG HANSA LAUGHS AT THE SEA

Wang Hansa was the son of a falling star. He was very boastful, and thought himself the strongest man born.

“As a babe I ate the demon Sri Sana!” said he. “As a child I raced the eagle and won! As a youth I held my breath for a hundred days, to capture the Lake Fairy’s heart -- capturing also the right to rule Korvu!”

Such words annoyed the sea. She has always disliked upstarts. She visited Wang Hansa’s court one night, saying:

“O king, mighty may you be. But humility is virtue. Some deeds are beyond you. Not even you could touch my love the moon.”

Wang Hansa knew how the sea yearned for the moon. He had seen how she reached for her lover every tide, in vain. So he replied:

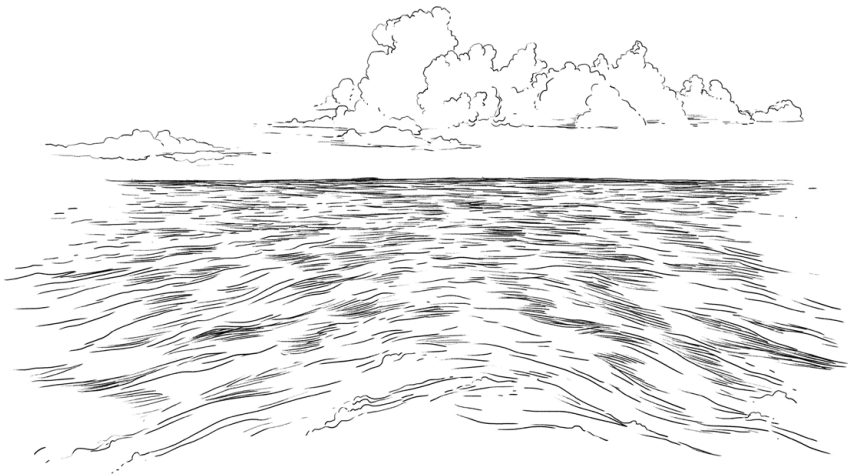
“I accept this challenge, o sea! I also set a wager! If I should steal from the moon, proving you wrong, you must give me your kingdom, free and forever!”

To which the sea asked: “And if I steal from my love the moon? What then? Will your kingdom be similarly mine to own?”

“A contest! Let’s see who brings back the bigger piece!” said Wang Hansa, already beating his chest, assured in victory, laughing so hard it rattled his throne room.

FIVE DAYS INTO THE RAINY SEASON

Thunder rolls away and the waves die out. Sun breaks through the clouds. You hear a drum, beating: faster -- closer. Closer.



WAR-BARGE OF DROWNED KORVU



A confection of intricate carvings, loud banners, garish colours. As if you are being hunted by a pride parade. The barge is:

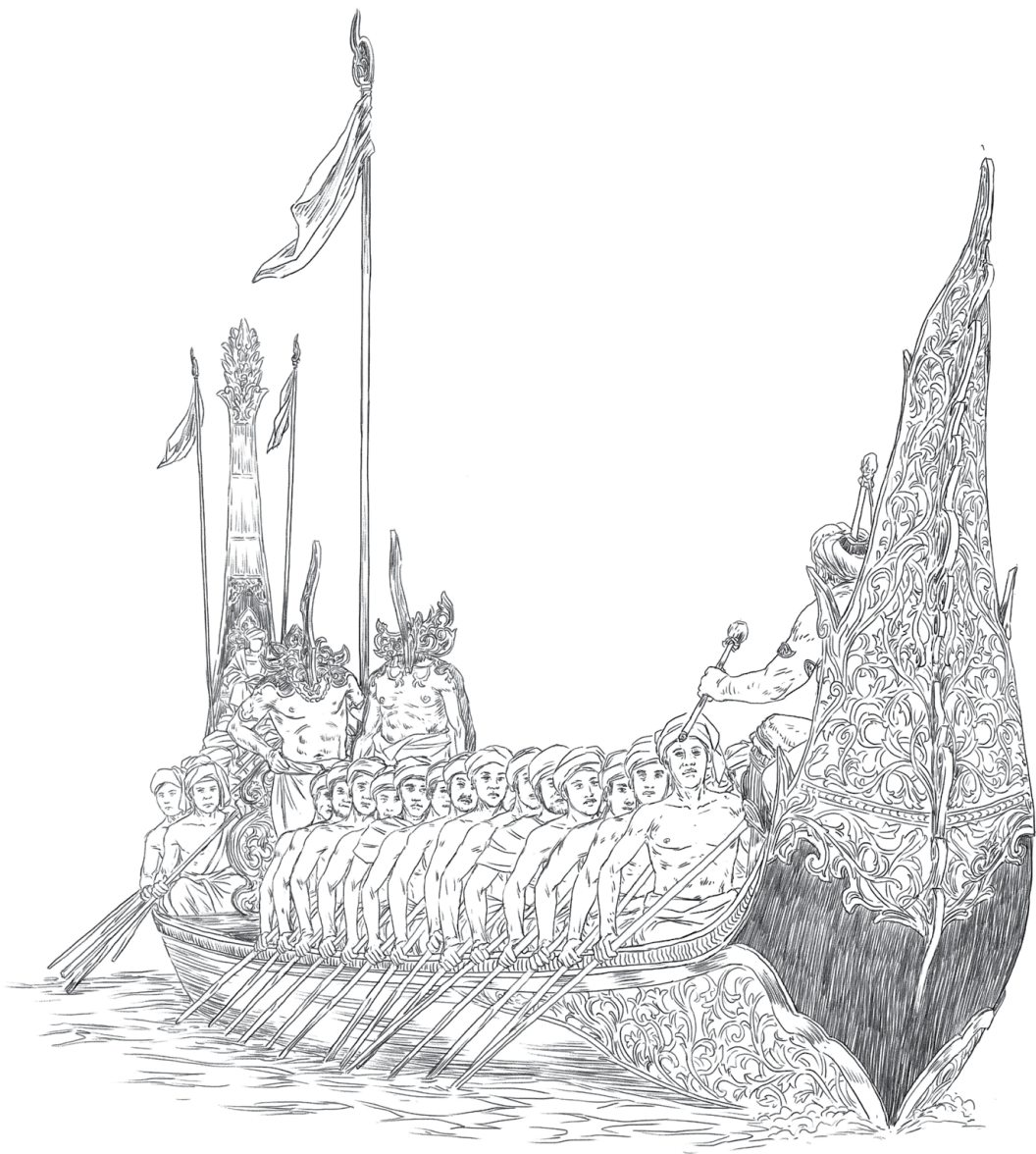
- 1 Armoured in gleaming gold.
- 2 Crimson, shaded into sable.
- 3 Algae green and sky azure.
- 4 Sheathed in a glossy black.
- 5 Dressed in lush indigo silks.
- 6 Every colour of the rainbow.
- 7 Swathed in saffron scarves.
- 8 Purple, with orange edging.
- 9 Scarlet, highlighted to pink.
- 10 Covered with silver scales.

Her prow is an abstracted:

- 1 Cockerel, somewhat nonplussed.
- 2 Crocodile, snout pouting toothily.
- 3 Salamander, with a stupid smile.
- 4 Parrot, its beak grasping a pearl.
- 5 Crane, too proud to bow its head.
- 6 Hornbill, peering down, curiously.
- 7 Elephant, chomping its own trunk.
- 8 Carp, its round eye glaring, angry.
- 9 Dog, its face a spasm of laughter.
- 10 Snake, tiered crown on its head.

These attributes together give the barge her name. “Gold Cockerel” or “Indigo Crane” or “Rainbow Parrot”.

The drummer plays hard. The sailors roar and whoop, head-banging to his tempo. Their oar-arms blur. The barge races over the water.



CAPTAIN OF DROWNED KORVU

In Korvu, you cannot own a ship. Ships are people.

Boatwrights are matchmakers. You bring them a dowry, which they use to build a body for a consenting soul. When the work is complete you are wed, ship and spouse.

To marry a war-barge is to marry into the obligations of warrior nobility. This captain is:

- 1 Raiding a nearby port. Its mayor forgot Korvu's annual protection fee.
- 2 Couriering missives between warring kingdoms. A treaty is possible.
- 3 Hunting Sri Binteng, the pirate queen. Worth her weight in gold, alive.
- 4 Giving a wealthy foreigner a tour of the islands. He wants authenticity.
- 5 Escorting a trade envoy. Holds of iron ore, silk -- and illegal explosives.
- 6 Transporting a prisoner -- a fish-sauce demon, shaking its warded urn.
- 7 Ferrying a weeping prince. Betrothed to a dowager he has never seen.
- 8 Hunting Hunu Half-Whale. For the bounty on his skull, his spermaceti.
- 9 Stalking a treasure junk. Heavy with silver. Must be captured, not sunk.
- 10 Patrolling coastal villages. The pay is pittance. But somebody has to.



DRUMMER OF DROWNED KORVU

Mastery of the drum art drives Korvu's squadrons.

Oarsmen act in perfect time with the drummer's rhythm. The beat of his right stick choreographs their actions -- goads them to inhuman speeds; lets them execute impossible manoeuvres.

The beat of his left stick:

- 1 Commands your right hand, so long as you hear it.
- 2 Animates jewellery. These conga towards the drum.
- 3 Drowns out your voice, and the voices of your allies.
- 4 Ages the wood of your ship. It begins to rot and leak.

- 5 Banishes incorporeal spirits. They are lost for a day.
- 6 Scares marine creatures. Sharks flee, monsters dive.
- 7 Extinguishes fires. Nothing combusts within earshot.
- 8 Vibrates in all ceramics. They crack, crumble to dust.
- 9 Summons, coordinates a massive shoal of flying fish.
- 10 Causes your legs to do a jig, so long as you hear it.

KNIGHT OF DROWNED KORVU

When knights are bonded to a war-barge they take her heraldry as their own.

Literally. They tattoo themselves in the barge's colours. They practice ritual decapitation, replacing their heads with hardwood prows. Mirroring their feudal mistress, they mirror her soul, and acquire strange powers.

They are mute, and never need to breathe. This particular prow-headed knight:

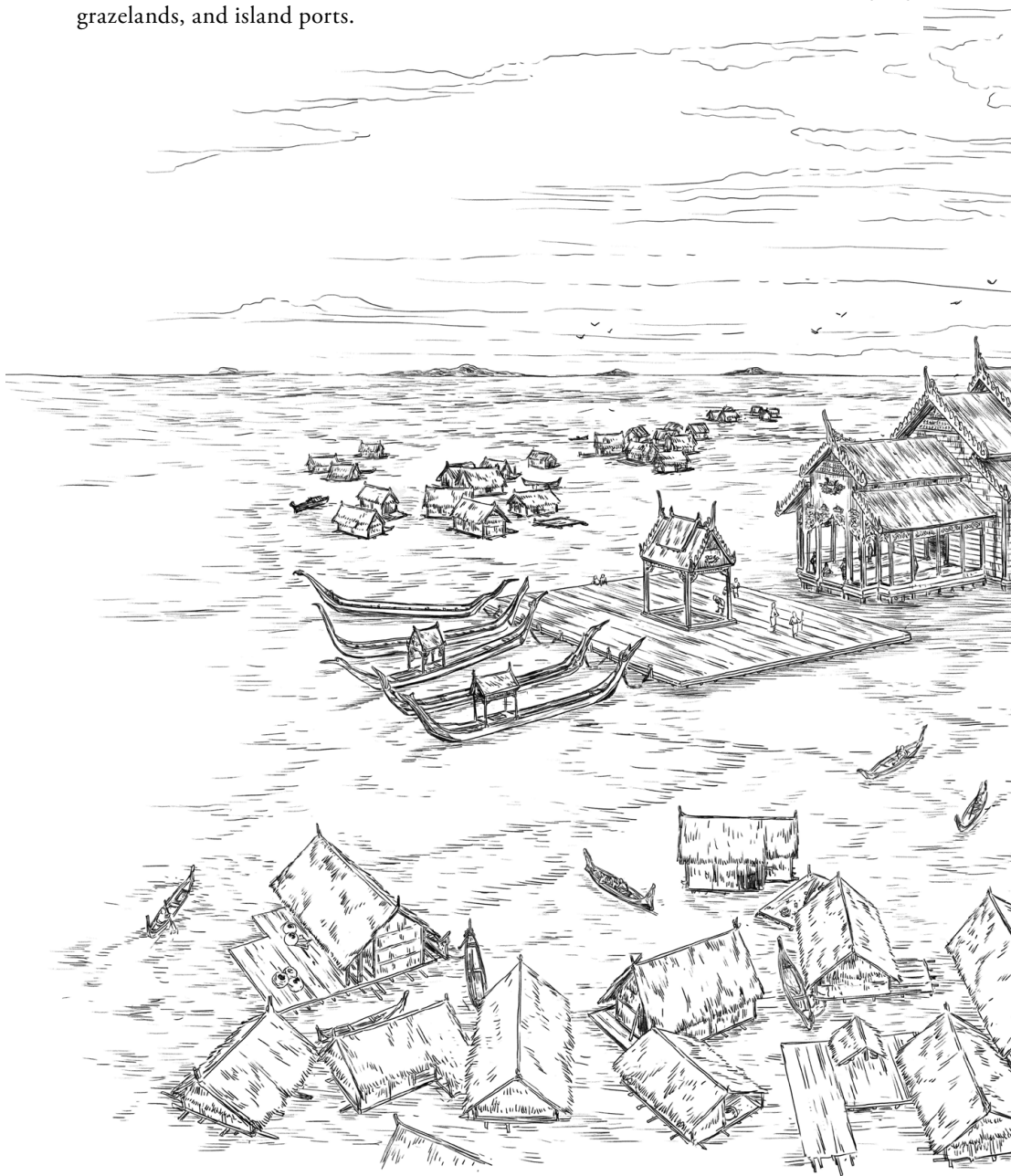
- 1 Quickens wood at a nudge. Masts branch; planks fruit.
- 2 Has venom under their nails. A scratch paralyzes you.
- 3 Blinds any creature they stare at with their painted eye.
- 4 Cannot lose their footing, whatever the circumstances.
- 5 Causes violent seasickness in any creature they touch.
- 6 Constantly sweats rum. Crewmates lick it off their skin.
- 7 Chucks harpoons so forcefully they hit like round shot.
- 8 Glows with bioluminescent cool, from sunset to sunrise.
- 9 Has skin hard as treated timber. They bleed clear sap.
- 10 Walks on water. Only works if there's no land in sight.

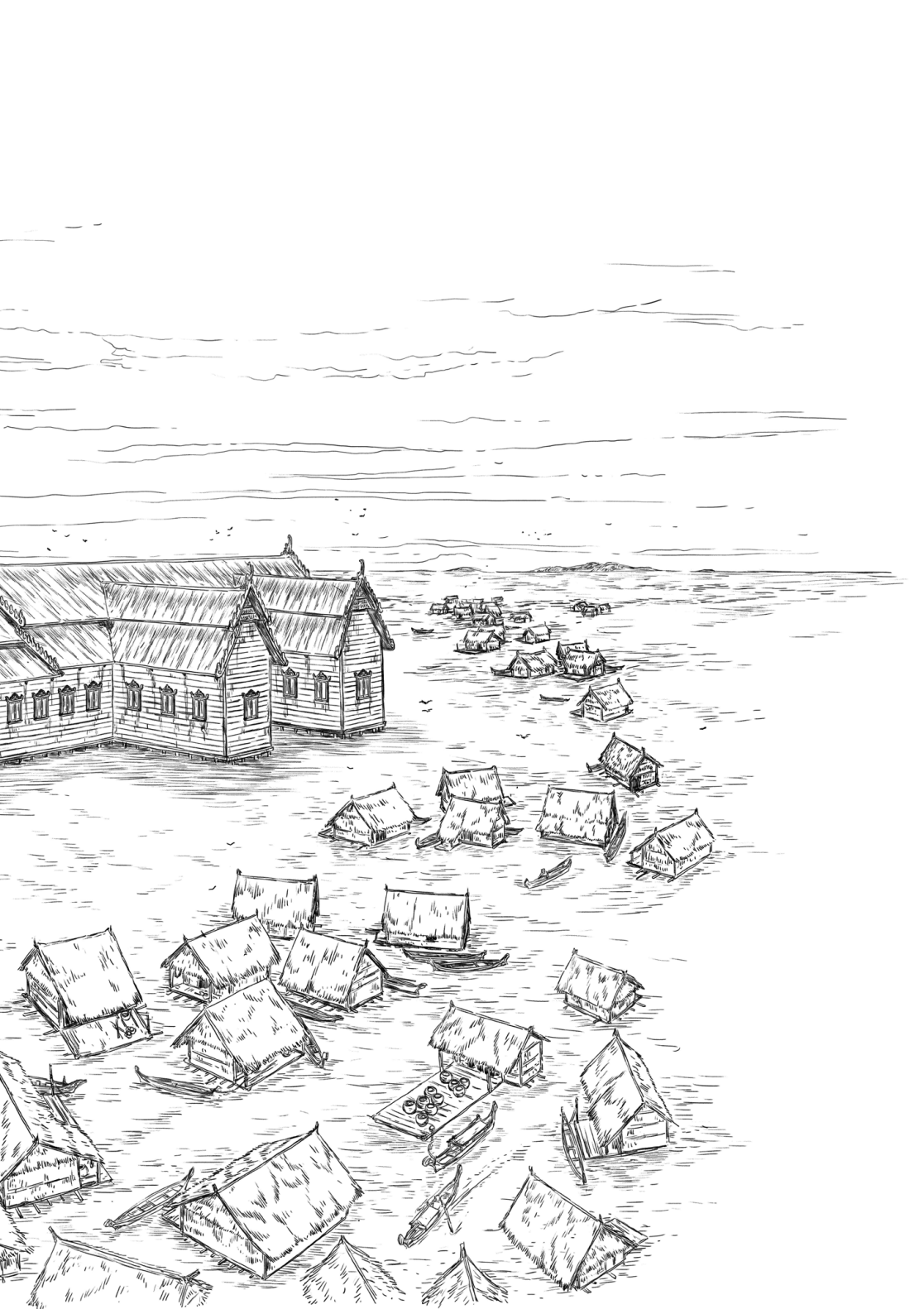




LIFE IN DROWNED KORVU

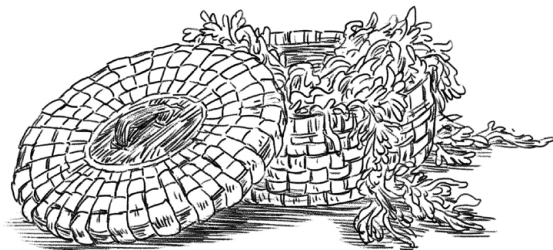
They are a people in motion. The adventurous join a war-barge; craftspeople sell their services to faraway courts; traders run a predictable circuit of sea-folk flotillas, dugong grazelands, and island ports.





DELICACIES OF DROWNED KORVU

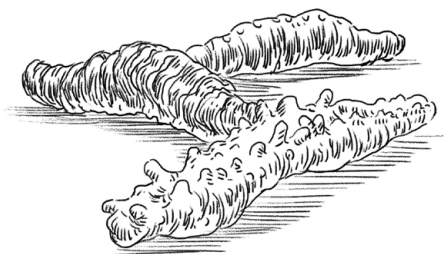
They don't fish as often as you expect. Korvu has ties to many submarine polities, and most shoals are claimed by one fish god or another.



PURPLE SARGASSUM

Free-floating seaweed. Forms vast drifts, and its colour bleeds; the waves lap like red wine. Roasted or served in broth.

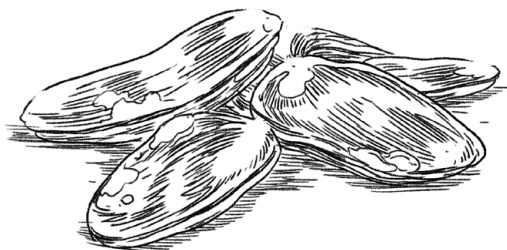
Said to be the spilt viscera of the gull god Kaku Kun. This checks out? A bowl of purple seaweed soup will sate a vampire.



LAND TREPANG

Sea cucumbers too stupid to realise they've wriggled onto land. Collected during the dry season; pickled or desiccated for trade.

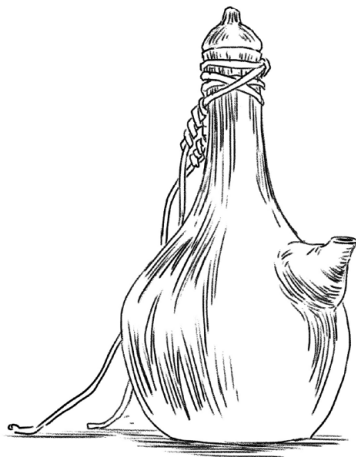
Marine animals that eat the land trepang absorb its obliviousness, and now breathe and swim in air as if it were salt water. Effects last a day.



GOLD MUSSELS

Farmed in intertidal shallows by the coral-folk of Amphut Reef. It is their only export. They pay for everything in mussels.

Chewy black flesh, with a metallic aftertaste; valves of actual, mineral gold. These shells serve as currency, in Korvu and beyond.



HOLY RAIN

Water from the season's opening storm is collected in a porcelain flask, then sealed, so as to preserve its sanctity.

Infused with the sea's tidal love, it never stops sloshing. It is warm in your throat. A flaskful washes away all curses, closes all wounds.



AMBERGRIS

Whale-folk swallow all sorts of things, down in the deeps. Monstrous, unspeakable things they can't always digest.

These things pass through a whale-person's gut, get coated in bile, and float to the surface: beaks; claws; compound and alien eyes. Precious reagents for magicians.



HATE PEARL

When the clam-folk of Ruyur Reef are angry, or sad, or distressed in any way -- they coat their pain in nacre.

They are a placid people, and their bodies produce pearls of startling beauty. Crushed, mixed into your food, a hate pearl infects you with crippling emotional trauma.

LISTENING TO THE FISH-SAUCE SPIRIT

Sauce spirits dance in urns of anchovies and seaweed-salt and spice. Over the course of a year they transform these elements into an umber fluid of complex umami and intense odour.

Be careful! The smell will bowl you over.



The saucier leans over the mouth of an urn. She is listening to her spirits. This year, they tell her, they would like to be fed:



- 1 Sea grapes, from the mer-king's private kelpyard.
- 2 A pint of blood from a child, not yet two years old.
- 3 Glowing mangosteens, from a forest-god's grove.
- 4 A pot of sorghum wine, rescued from a shipwreck.
- 5 Tamarind paste, flavoured with a daughter's tears.
- 6 A garland of flowers, fresh from a knight's funeral.
- 7 Glutinous-rice cakes, made by a mountain hermit.
- 8 A banana heart, cut from a haunted banana plant.
- 9 Hairs plucked from the Monkey King's sacred pate.
- 10 A scroll of ancient scripture, burnt into a fine ash.

The resulting sauce cannot be described in mere words. Kings will war to have its flavour at their dinner table.

FISH-SAUCE DEMON

Anchovy souls are hungry ghosts. Sometimes a sauce spirit stumbles -- and is eaten. Thus is a demon born.

The urn shatters. A living tide of putrefying fry sweeps the deck. Smashes the other pots, swallows the saucier. It wants to taste your flavour. Every flavour!

It bites with a million tiny teeth. It may:

- 1 Gleam, invitingly. You cannot help yourself; you move closer.
- 2 Leap. Jumping down your throat it will wear you as a puppet.
- 3 Throw pseudopods. Its touch strips paint, and skin, and flesh.

- 4 Ooze, slow as molasses. So sticky, a bear could not get free.
- 5 Wobble like jelly. Its stench punches you with physical weight.
- 6 Shiver in frustration. All prepared foods spoil in its presence.
- 7 Spurt at your face. Its stink stains your spirit with terrible luck.
- 8 Whip tentacles about. These slice wood and bone and steel.
- 9 Slip into a body of water. Reappears on any connected shore.
- 10 Ripple, mesmerisingly. Meat you've eaten today reanimates.

With every new creature it tastes, it learns another power. All it eats it adds to itself.



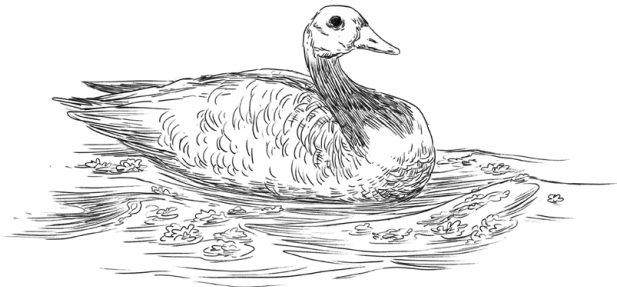
KORVU'S DEBT TO THE SEA



Korvu belongs to the sea. Its king is a tenant, forced to rent use of his lands. His people spend the rainy season trading, raiding -- raising a goddess's ransom.

On the first full-moon night of the year, the king offers this amassed wealth in tribute, announcing every chest, every jewel, every morsel he puts to the waves. Accepted, it is pulled under. Rejected, it floats.

The sea demands more from kings who do not please her. These typically find some way to do penance, or are overthrown.



HALCYON GOOSE

Loud and belligerent, it loves to pick fights. It bites to draw blood. It scares inclement weather; at its honking storms clear, rains stop, winds cease.

Domesticated in Korvu, they fill the niche occupied by dogs, elsewhere: they are pets, guards -- comrades-in-arms. Their meteorological effects augment a war squadron's strengths.

They are the reincarnation of Wang Hansa, first king of Korvu. The return of flocks of wild geese is a sign that Korvu's debt to the sea has been paid, for another year; the dry season may now begin.

THE HALL OF WANG HANSA

When the sea claimed her due, Wang Hansa raised his palace on stilts to keep it from drowning, unlike the rest of his country. So it has stood as the house of his descendants -- the only fixed structure in all Korvu.

Noble war-barges are tethered to the entrance pavilion. The royal barge occupies a drydock behind the throne.

WANG CHERTA, KING

Silken speech and a library of eloquent smirks.

Cherta has never fought in battle. He has never needed to. Diplomacy spills more blood than spears ever do. Enjoys the thrust and riposte of negotiations -- rare is the deal not cut in his favour.

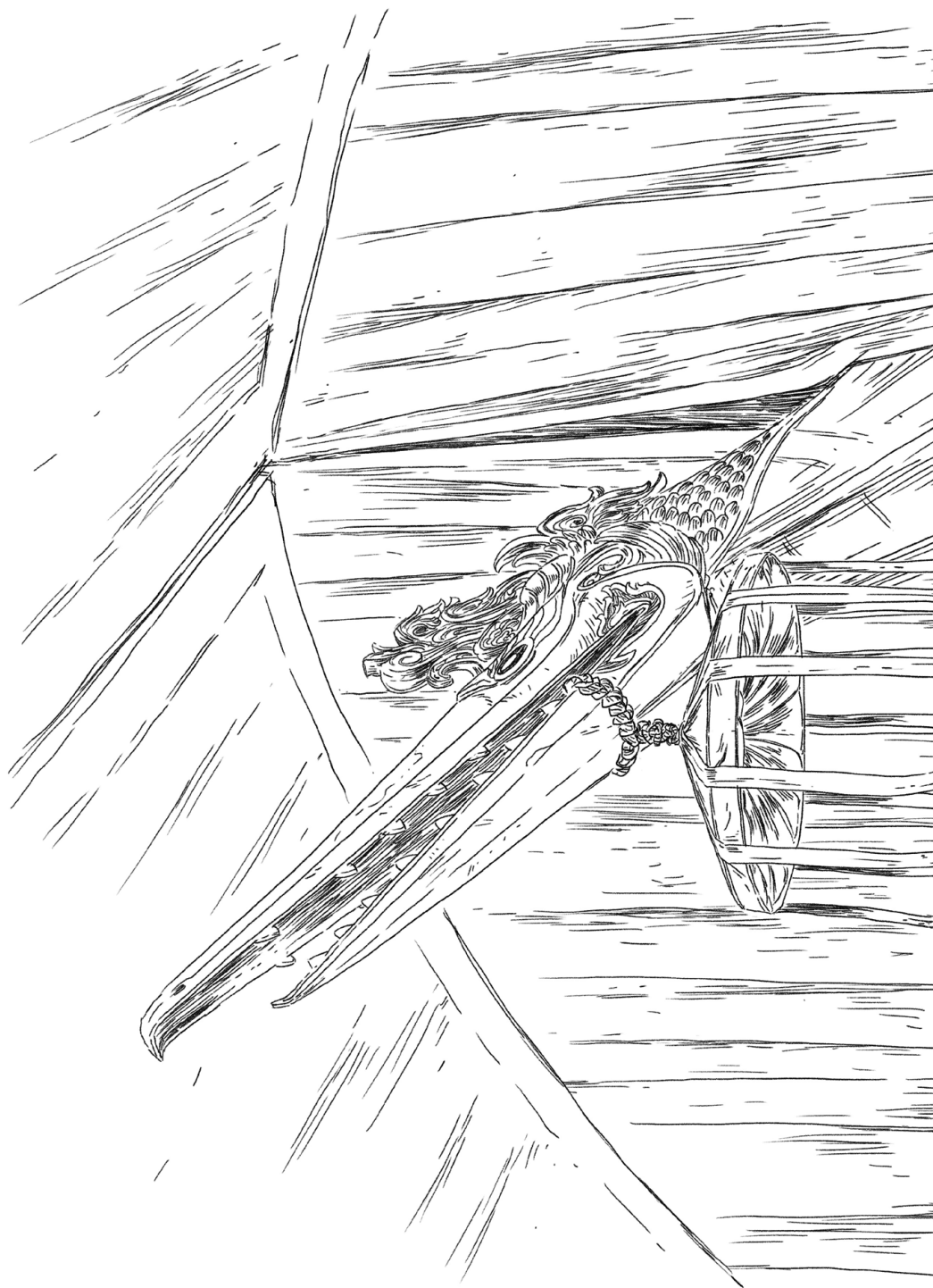
Hiring chaperones for Dam Sip Samug's tour of the surface world. Wants incompetents. The prince should be traumatised by his trip; he must see Korvu as the ray-folk's only human ally.

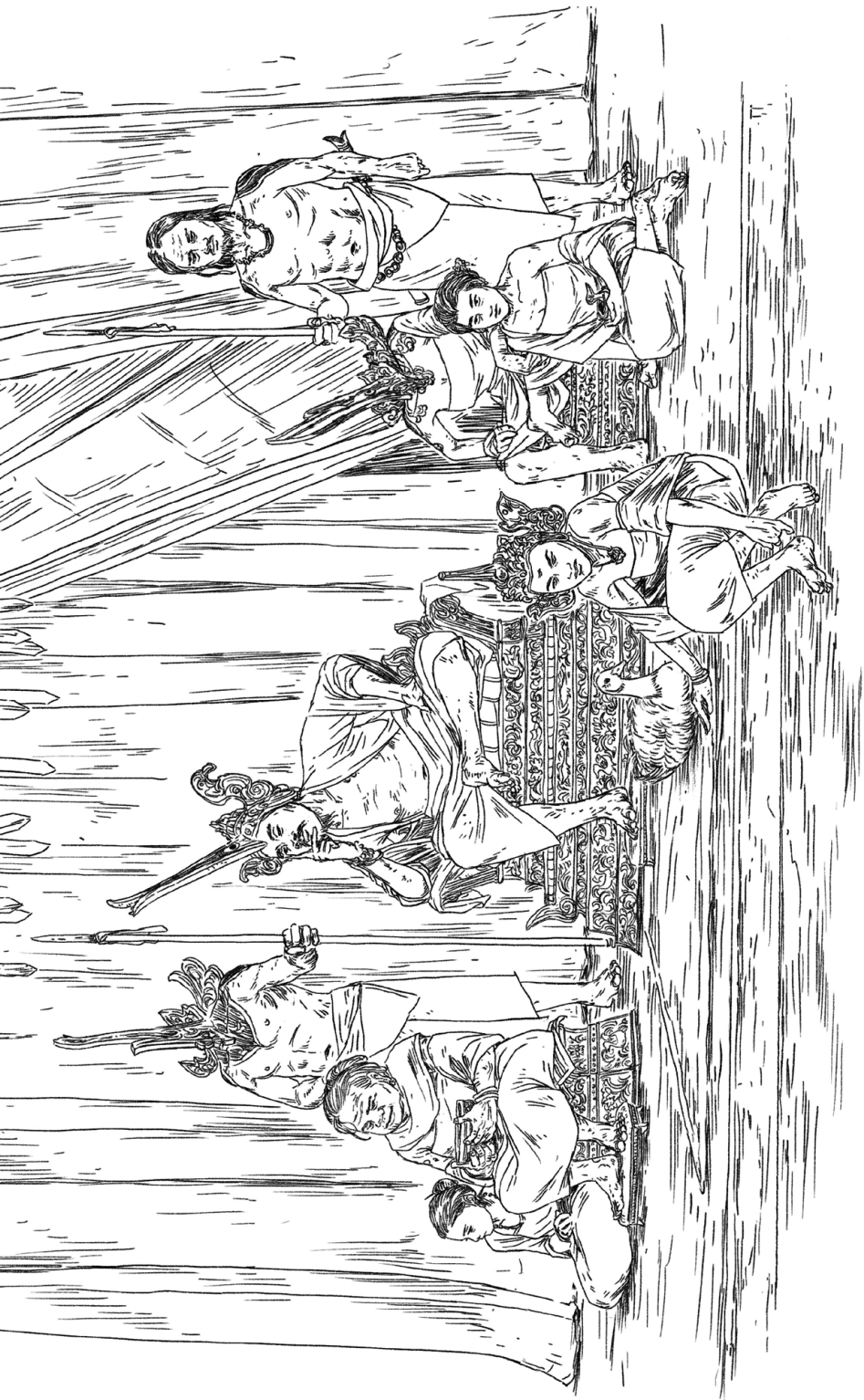
GOLDEN GOOSE ARJANI, QUEEN CONSORT

Tapping hand, restless right leg.

Throws her arms up and storms off, if courtly ritual annoys her. Which is often. Arjani has a warrior's heart, and has come to think her husband a coward.

In an affair with Golden Goose Kunchu, a fellow prow-headed knight. Her husband knows -- but it is a don't-ask-don't-tell thing. For now.





WANG CHIRIWI, QUEEN MOTHER

Sleepy with age. She nods over her bowl of seawater.

Her handmaid keeps this bowl filled. She was once chief priestess of the sea; its waves gave her visions of the future. Now her bowl murmurs lullabies.

“Red coral yellow coral,” Chiriwi mumbles. “Stingray sunray sunfish jellyfish jelly underhat on your jellyhead.”

KUNG CHIRISA, CHIEF PRIESTESS

Voice like cigarette smoke. Whispering in the king's ear.

Frequently adjusting her ebony crown. A jellyfish is hidden underneath, its tentacles touching her brain through a hole in her skull.

Chirisa has been subverted by the Hao. She giggles in the king's ear. She will seduce him. The Hao must have him.

GOLDEN GOOSE, ROYAL BARGE

Shining scrollwork on new wood. She's just had a new prow fitted.

Golden Goose is three centuries old. No part of her original body remains; piece by piece, boatwrights have repaired and replaced her.

She hates this. A war-barge should not live forever. She has lost too many husbands, too many wives. Countless crew. She wants to die, in one last battle.



GUESTS AT THE HALL OF WANG HANSA

Surface kingdoms send representatives during the dry season. Pelagic peoples visit during the rainy season.



KNU, COMMUNARD OF AMPHUT REEF

The coral communes of Amphut and Ruyur are sacred to the moon. Ancient ententes oblige Korvu to defend them.

Poachers and pearl-hunters have been preying on Amphut's southern reach. Knu has come to demand that Wang Cherta do his duty.



MISSIONARIES OF THE HAO

The Hao is love. Peace for all living things. The Hao want host bodies -- they wish for throats to speak their message; and feet to carry it afar.

Will you lend them your head, your body? No harm will come to you. All hosts love the Hao. Because the Hao is love.

Prow-headed knights, having no heads where the Hao may sit, are utterly incapable of feeling love. This distresses the Hao. Korvu deserves peace.



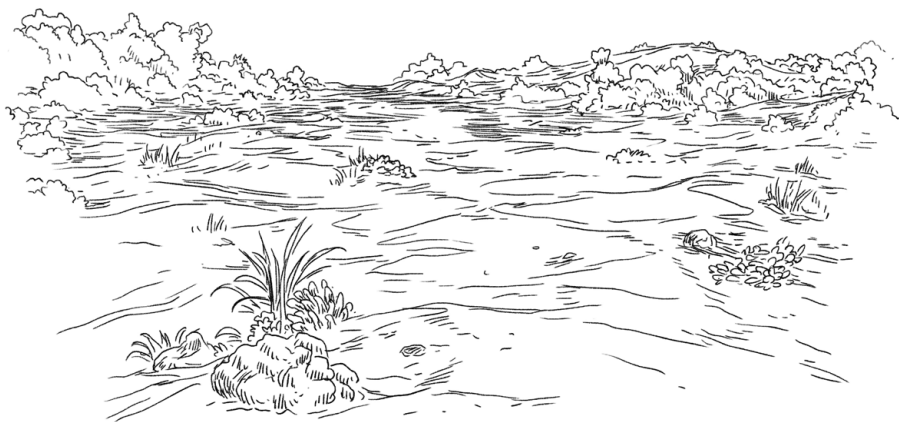
DAM SIP SAMUG, PRINCE OF QA BIRAQ

No ship returns from Qa Biraq, the great murk where the ray-folk rule. Dam Sip Samug is the first ambassador from that sea in living memory.

Puppets the corpse of a drowned woman. This makes him more personable, surely? He wears the correct drylander shape -- two arms, two legs. He's even put on clothes!

THREE DAYS OUT, DURING THE DRY SEASON

There is a hole in the ocean, between your prow and the horizon line. A wide, deep valley. The waves slope steeply down to the beach below.



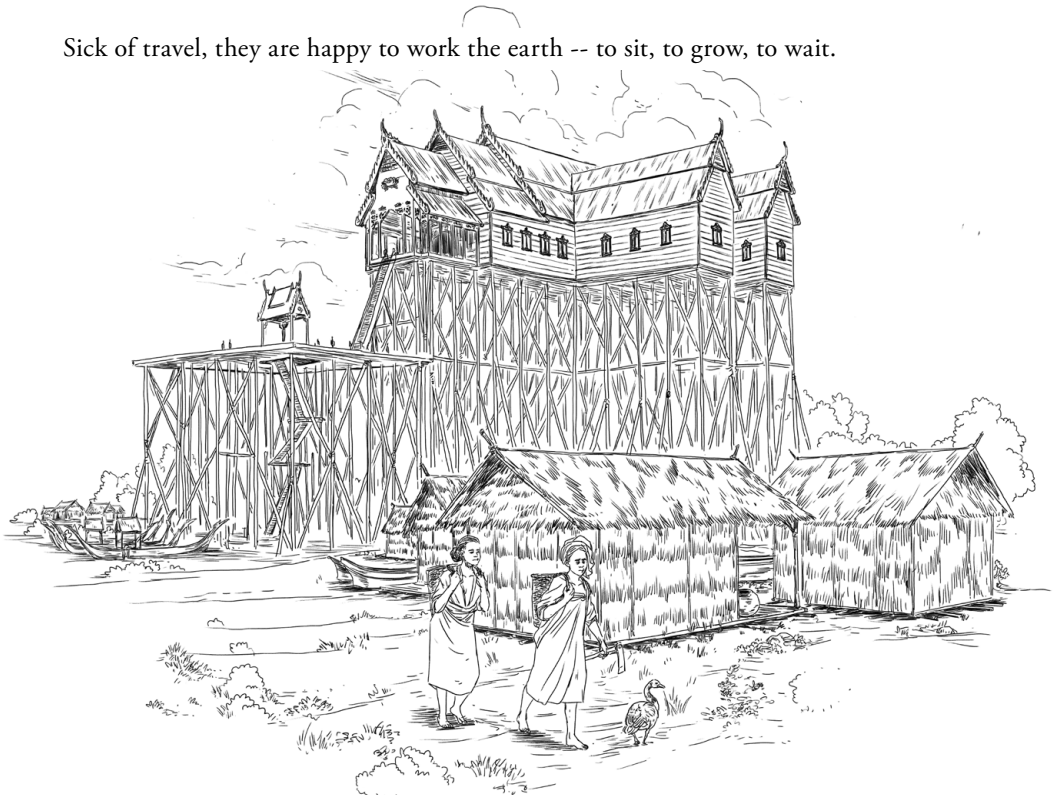
LIFE IN DRY KORVU



Villagers return to familiar landmarks: a saltwater lake; a beached reef; an island now turned into the peak of a mountain.

They are a settled people. Where their house-boats come to rest is where they dig out last year's paddies. They turn the ooze. They plant in rice squares ringed by coral fences.

Sick of travel, they are happy to work the earth -- to sit, to grow, to wait.





LOK AND LUDHANG, FEUDING FARMERS

The spirit of Kuntur Island ferments coconuts on the tree -- resulting in fruit whose water is delicious and intoxicating.

Lok's great-grandparents planted Kuntur's original groves. Ludhang's grandmother summoned the island's spirit. Both believe they alone are entitled to the profits.

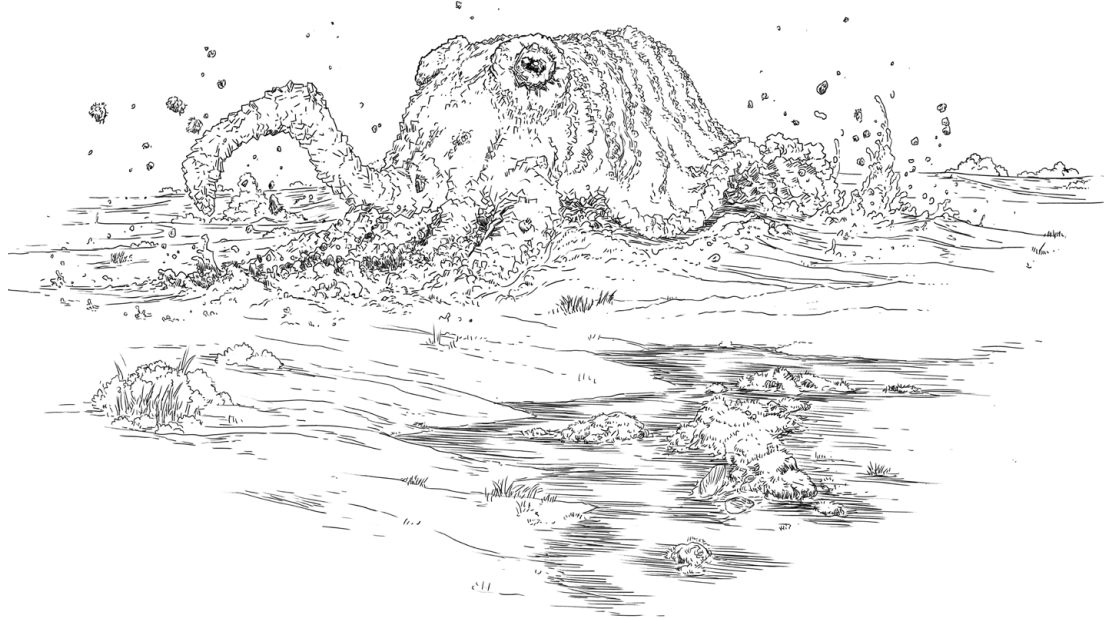
CALLING ON THE SALT GOD

Korvu spends six months as a seabed. Its topsoil is too salty to grow crops.

When the dry season begins the shaman stuffs herself with seaweed and salted fish. She munches on mangrove leaves. She drinks soy sauce.

She prays. Her belly swells. In days she goes into labour. Under its amniotic slime her baby's crystal skin is fractal, sandpaper-coarse. Its lidless eyes follow your movements. Its tentacles writhe.

This is the salt god.



SALT GOD

Crystallized salt in the shape of a cuttlefish. Skimming close to the ground it dips its arms into fields and canals. It leeches the salinity of everything it touches.

It expands -- becoming blockier, more angular, like zooming in on a low-res image. Now it may:



- 1 Attract animals like a magnet. These can't stop licking its body.
- 2 Absorb moisture on contact. Mummifies you in under a minute.
- 3 Exude a swirling cloud. Smells of incense; dissolves spellwork.
- 4 Squirt pigmentless ink. Permanently bleaches flesh and fabrics.
- 5 Eject a gale-force wind. This could send a war-barge tumbling.
- 6 Turn invisible. The earth is stirred by its unseen fins and limbs.
- 7 Transform sentient male creatures into pillars of salt. On sight.
- 8 Fill itself with gases. Flight-capable. Maneuverable as a blimp.
- 9 Force you to your knees. Bows your head. It is a god, after all.
- 10 Attracts spirits like a magnet. These get stuck onto its mantle.

For every three miles it travels, cleansing the land, it doubles in size and gains another power.

The salt god is an obedient child -- at first. The bigger it grows, the more it understands it need not fear its mother. A shaman must be wily to steer it towards Korvu's borders.

It dissipates when it meets the sea.



FANG WANINI, SALT SHAMAN

From a long line of shamans. Wanini inherited their terrible complexion and fearful abilities. She keeps the souls of her seven great-aunts close, in fish-head talismans.

Instead of helping, they bicker and distract her. She will botch her next salt-god birth. Not listening to her, it will run amok.

ENCOUNTERS IN DRY KORVU



There are no roads. Travelling further than to your local village is generally frowned upon, during the dry season. People are inclined to set their geese on outsiders.

You spot:



2

A waterlogged chest. Possibly filled with treasure? Every time you try opening it the lid slams shut. “Leave it be, thief!” hisses the unseen ghost of its owner.

3

A sea-urchin spirit. It refused to evacuate with the receding sea. It acts as if it is still submerged. Any creature it sees has their lungs fill with water.

4 An envoy from Kra-Sayar, with a painted fan. In a litter, escorted by retainers riding great cassowaries. Here to buy Korvu's services against Kra-Tamar.

5 A family of coral-folk from Amphut Reef, on holiday. Decked in porcelain jewelry. Mistreating them in any way is sacrilege. Korvu-folk will form lynch mobs.

6 A pod of dolphins. Hopped up on trepang, performing loop-the-loops in mid-air. Basically catcalling teenage vandals. Here to harass the locals. Or you.

7 A caravan. Neha the trader has bullock carts laden with rosewood and mahogany, cut from a magic forest. Boatbuilders here pay a premium for rare lumber.

8 A shiver of sharks. Dosed with trepang, they swim the air. They circle to question you. They are hunting dolphin hoodlums, for crimes against the merking.

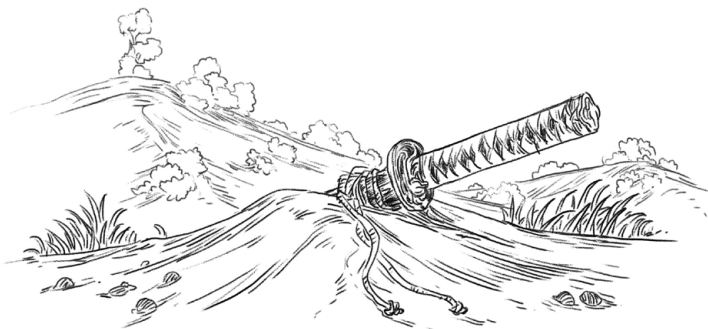
9 A wreck spirit. Its fur is kelp, its muscles bleached wood, its heart a knot of shipworms. Revenge flows in its veins. It seeks the war-barge that sunk it.

10 An envoy from Kra-Tamar, with a jade earpick. In a sedan chair, escorted by knights on great boars. Come to buy Korvu's services against Kra-Sayar.

11 A wandering prow-headed knight. Woebegone from the death of their liege, they wish to die also. Will draw their sword on any opponent they think worthy.

12 A goat-sized salt god. Hides from you like a wounded animal. Will you give it shelter? A shaman comes by, later, with a rattan cane and a vexed sigh.

If you roll doubles, a gaggle of kids are also present. They are beachcombing. All sorts of salvage wash up in Korvu. The sea leaves gifts, sometimes.



PLEASING THE BOAT SOUL

A shipyard is like a temple: haze from the firepits, over which planks are heated and bent; a steady drum as they are hammered and joined, so they keep a beat.

Boat souls are picky beings. Their bodies must be artful, precious.

The wright wakes from her trance. She calls her workers, and breaks the news. This is a difficult commission. The soul refuses to come down, unless its body is:



- 1 Sheathed in brass scales, from the armour of dead soldiers.
- 2 Plated in gold -- treasure won in violence, then melted down.
- 3 Painted in deep purples, derived from the ink of a squid god.
- 4 Varnished in shellac, chipped from the walls of a fairy palace.
- 5 Planked by wood stripped from a wreck spirit, now at peace.
- 6 Assembled under the light of the full moon -- in a single night.
- 7 Caulked with oakum made from the hair of disgraced monks.
- 8 Daubed with the first menses of your youngest blood relative.
- 9 Keeled with heartwood of a tree, exactly a hundred years old.
- 10 Topped with a prow that once sat atop a knight's shoulders.



TUNG FATIMA, MASTER BOATWRIGHT

She focuses on carving prows, nowadays. The drudge labour she leaves to her husbands.

Her human eyes dim. So she wears seven painted replacements: on her arms, in her headdress. These help her see heat, auras, spirit spoor -- lights beyond human sight.

Her human hands shake. She slaps her palms in frustration. She cannot make replacements for these; no wooden fingers she can whittle would be articulate enough. What good is her art, if it cannot help with this?

THE FIRST STORM OF THE SEASON

Wild geese form long wings, pulled northwards. The dry season comes to an end.

It comes as a relief. Six months staring at fields, threshing rice, arguing with neighbours -- people are ready to get moving, again.

Thunder rolls. The first storm of the rainy season is holy. Folk tumble out of their homes to dance in the downpour. A festival of bare arms, clinging fabric, smiles at new and secret loves.

The following week is one of wet, and weddings. The sea slips like a slow-motion landslide, and drowns Korvu.



WANG HANSA PINCHES THE MOON

With one leap Wang Hansa crossed the sky, a streaming star, landing on the moon. There he plucked meat from the moon's cheek.

This he threw into the sea. It crashed as a meteor, creating many storms. Nursed in the sea's womb, the meteor began to grow. Over time it grew as living stone into all the coral reefs we now know.

Meanwhile Wang Hansa alighted on earth, and said: "I have stolen flesh from the moon's face! See its cheek? How could you match my feat?"

The sea was silent, but pointed at the waves of her belly, which by now were becalmed. In that mirrored surface a shape appeared: round, luminous, scarred by Wang Hansa's hand -- the very moon itself.

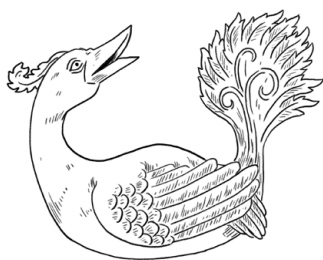
"I have stolen my love the moon in her entirety," said the sea.

And the moon spoke from her reflection: "Yes, she has me."

Because the moon loved the sea in return, and also she dislikes upstarts, and was angry at Wang Hansa for her most recent injury. She would give him no face, despite all his yelling and begging.

Thus did Wang Hansa lose his bet, and learn to stop being so boastful. And ever since the kings of Korvu have been vassals of the sea.





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